

# Sarah Lawrence



*Accreditation report:*

*'Clarity of mission'  
amid the ambiance  
of an English village*

■ *The opera characters  
that haunted  
Chester Biscardi*

■ *SLC slam dunking*

*New institute expands child-development studies*

# Sarah Lawrence

Fall • Winter 1987-88



*Institute studies the serious work of a child at play.*

9



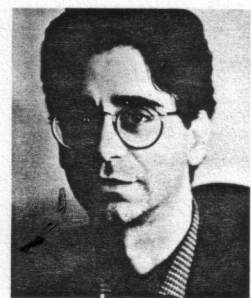
*A team afire with SLC pride*

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*Alumnae/i afloat during "Perfect Weekend"*

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*Biscardi afflicted by created characters*

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## 'Clarity of mission'

2

A once-a-decade evaluation commended the College for the quality of its faculty and its well-defined mission. But the accrediting team shared some of the College's concerns about the years ahead.

## Diary of a slam dunker

6

Alumnus Uri Berliner '77 remembers the great year when he coached the Green Machine through a near-faultless first half against Manhattanville, and a mumble-mumble record overall.

## A boost for child development

9

The largest outright gift ever made to the College establishes a new institute to consolidate and expand SLC's venerable child-development programs.

## 'Perfect Weekend' draws 365

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The first full-fledged class reunions at the College provided surprises for visitors to campus and New York City events.

## Chester Biscardi's haunting characters

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The Sarah Lawrence music teacher thought self-doubt would disappear the longer he worked as a composer. Then the opera characters he created took over his work.

## Precarious balance at budget time

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When Washington trims aid, Melissa and David suffer.

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**On our cover.** Alexandra Poer '91 and Philip Shneidman '89 (*foreground*) and Lindsay Fass '87 and Peter Coughlin '89, in front of the classic Tudor lines of Tweed, one of the buildings lending an English-village aura to the Sarah Lawrence campus. Cover photo: John Meyers.

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Meno mosso (1/2 ca. 60)  
mp (careful, simple, not melodramatic)

*molto*  
145

# Keeping a long work alive

*poco string. →  
poco cresc. →*

*piu' strings. →*

*molto*  
*molto*  
*poco*  
We walk a tight-rope:

one false step, one — dis-hon-est word, and we fall — we de-serve to fall!

By **Chester Biscardi**

At some point in my personal journal I wrote: "The process of working out a life, personally and artistically, is what my life is all about." Although it now strikes me as being a bit pretentious, I do feel that it is valid. In fact, the other day while talking to a young man in the public relations office here at the College, I made that exact statement. At the end of the conversation I begged him not to have the director return my call because I was unplugging my phone to go back to work. He

Very delicate

Sub. mp

*molto  
meno  
mosso  
(1/2 ca. 40)* / poco rall.

said: "Well, have fun working on life!"

What more can you wish to anyone, not just to the creative artist? And by the way, everyone has the same flashes of inspiration, moments of understanding and perceptions of beauty that we usually assign only to the "artist." If the artist is singular at all, his only singularity is that he hangs on to and is fascinated by those moments of revelation that most people look at and let go. The artist notices those moments of insight earlier, pays more attention to them and spends more time questioning them. But he pays a price for that insight.

Many people think that the artist is driven by his inspiration along a single, uncluttered path toward the completion of his work. In my experience that is far from the truth. That straight path to accomplishment is cluttered with many roadblocks, the most disturbing of which is the inevitable self-doubt. I found some words of playwright David Rabe that said it for me perfectly:

Much of the early struggle in writing is with what I call "The Censor," the voice that says, "It's not good" or wants to know what the third line will be before you've written the first one. That voice is very, very untalented, and when I really get going, it just vanishes. (*The New York Times*, June 17, 1984)

If I had the notion that the sense of doubt would disappear the longer I work as a composer, I learned I was wrong when I began my opera, *Tight-Rope*. Suddenly I had to deal with two elements that were quite strange to me: the words, and the stubbornness and contrariness of characters. Up to that time, my creative vocabulary had been limited to all the elements of musical structure. As for the perversity of characters, most novelists are used to that as I am used to the musical scale. I was warned that they would move into my studio, try to dictate their own music, flatly refuse to sing mine, and I didn't believe it. I was wrong. Characters take away your freedom to sit and compose as your imagination carries you. They do take over. And that is precisely what keeps the work alive, however many years it may take, because you have no way of predicting in a tidy fashion how

characters choose to explain themselves.

It reminded me of a remark of Simenon, the French mystery writer, who said in his *Memoires*: "I put myself into a state of grace before beginning a novel." And when asked to explain, he said:

The Catholic idea. The state of grace, the idea of being without sin. I didn't believe in that. I did believe in a sort of vacuum. To be completely receptive, to become empty so that the characters may inhabit me. I become the characters. I am a slave of my characters. But not of myself. (*The New York Times*, April 22, 1984)

Or, as Charles Dickens phrased it: "I put my fictitious companions in the upper place at feasts."

What brought those words of Simenon and Dickens to my mind was receiving a phone call inviting me to accept a commission for a new chamber opera to be premiered two years later at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. If I accepted the commission, and after much hemming and hawing and soul-searching I did, then I was going to have to deal with living characters in a music drama.

*Tight-Rope* is a chamber opera in one act, nine uninterrupted scenes. The libretto is an original idea by Henry Butler. The story is as follows:

The legend of Luther Dane, poet and cult hero, enhanced by his mysterious disappearance and presumed death, is now the subject of a film biography. On the first day of shooting, work is disrupted when the actor portraying Dane angrily insists that his lines could not be the words of the man whose life and poetry he so admires.

Left alone to sort out his feelings, the Actor is suddenly face-to-face with Luther Dane, very much alive, an unsuspected witness to the filming. Intrigued by the Actor's concern for integrity in his portrayal, the poet offers to piece together the not-so-well-known story of his life and "death."

Through Dane's memories and actual encounters, the Actor experiences the poet's explosive career, the men and women who shaped his life, and his powerful influence when he spoke to his dedicated followers. Most important, the Actor learns the truth about Dane's escape from an unbearable public image.

When the poet abruptly takes leave of him, the Actor begins to find the words and images he must use if he is to portray with honesty the life of Luther Dane.

I realized that I had to be every one of the characters, hear his or her music and find out how could it possibly work with everyone else's music. Fine. So I understand that. So where do I begin? Do I begin with musical themes? Some of my fellow composers insist that's the only way. Do I begin with individual arias, that is to say "songs," for each character? Or do I begin with abstract expressions of the entire theme of the opera? To some extent I ended up doing all three, and I never knew for sure which one was going to come first.

On Thursday, June 7, 1984, I was at the MacDowell Colony with the librettist. From my personal journal:

I finished a first sketch—after a week—of the poet's aria "I did not intend to be a poet...." Played it for Henry: "It's somber, don't your think? The line has a narrow range," he said. "It's confined." I thought it was *too* Broadway, *too* naive and open sounding!

Needless to say I was depressed. I felt that I didn't have the talent for characterization, or to write something as big as an opera. Of course, that was pure self-pity. But I was scared. I had been working intensely and I wanted some relief. The last thing I said to myself in that entry was: "I need to go on now. I am defining my version of this. And at this moment this is the *best* I can do."

Adria Firestone as Kathryn and John Reardon as Luther Dane.



The next morning I sounded a little more sensible:

There is no alternative to doing music. It may provoke fear and anxiety, but any other life would be dull and irresponsible. Some things will need to be scratched. Sometimes I will have to start all over. This morning it is very clear. The poet is not reflective. He is simply describing how he felt when he was young. So I must, like a good actor, play, know, feel young. Not controlled by any purely musical idea. The problem is not a question of masking tonality. That is superfluous. The character must be free, mercurial, not tied down ... I confine the voice by insisting that the vocal line and the accompaniment be one. It doesn't always work that way...

Let me show you what I mean. After that first version of the aria, and several others, I finally listened to what the poet wanted to say:

I did not intend to be a poet,  
no one, no one does,  
the title has no meaning, and the  
profession less.  
Day after day,  
the words and pictures made me drunk,  
tumbling through my head,  
demanding that I give them order,  
and that order is called poetry!  
(Scene 1, measures 175-187, piano/vocal score)

He goes on to speak of his youth, and this is the way he and I recaptured the sense, the feel, of being young:

I found a voice to comfort me, as no one could,  
I found an ear that heard me,  
no matter how corrupt or frightened I might be.  
And, most wonderful, I found a way to praise the utter beauty of everything I saw:  
the faces, the colors of the air,  
everything that grows and reaches for the sun,  
the miracles of what the heart can feel,  
the very fact that we are alive at all.  
Oh, I was young, that too was miraculous,  
and silence was impossible...  
I wrote my praise and sang it in the streets!  
(Scene 1, measures 188-217, piano/vocal score)

And in subsequent scenes I found that what I had to do was listen to the poet and listen to my inner voice, since, very simply, I had experienced every

emotional change that he was going through. And, not surprisingly, I had to do exactly the same thing with the principle female character, Kathryn. The librettist had given me some hints. Here's the note from my journal based on his description:

She is a mature woman...has natural flamboyance...Gypsy blood? ... More exactly Black Irish—Celtic mother and a father who's a Spanish sailor. Independent. Dresses as she pleases...can wear anything—it will become the fashion... She might have been burned as a witch in earlier days. Men notice her. Women often resent her. Warm, expansive, as she says of herself: "I love easily."

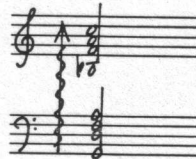
Now what is a composer supposed to do about a woman like that?! We had agreed that when the audience first saw Kathryn she would be creating a song—did I mention that she is a musician and a composer?—based on a text of the poet, Luther Dane. In fact, I received the text of seven possible songs from Henry. The first one went like this:

Lady, by your grave demeanor  
I perceive a heart that grieves.  
What brings you into the market,  
Bartering with priests and thieves?

And this is what I heard:



five notes



and a chord.

Kathryn never did sing those words. But she gave me approval for the five notes and the chord and accepted my idea that her song would develop into a trio involving the poet and the Actor who are eavesdropping on her creation of the song she sings:

I love the wanton freedom of my life,  
to gratify my deepest appetite,  
and seek the joyous company of men,

to taste the rich variety of men.

I love to watch the sensuous parade of shameless beauty, as they strut and preen,  
in blissful nakedness, so plumage proud,  
poor flightless creatures, still so plumage proud.

I love their strong blunt fingers on my skin,  
the sudden heat of harsh and broken breath,  
the unexpected rush of tenderness,  
that awkward, sweet, surprising tenderness.

I love them all, not one do I regret,  
for all too soon, I will not feel their touch,  
but then I will be resting in my grave,  
remembering and smiling in my grave.  
(Scene 5, measures 8-50, piano/vocal score).

I could and would with very little encouragement show you the same birth and evolution of the nine characters in the opera. But that would mean performing the entire work for you, and I would much rather that you meet those characters in the theater, supported by a full orchestra.

I hope that what I've shared with you answers the question of how a composer—well, how I, at least, can keep a long work alive. Incidentally, the mixture of confusion, inspiration and commitment does not, alas, end with the first performance of the opera. I expect to be haunted for a long time by passages in *Tight-Rope* where the inner voice says: "No, I should have done it in a different way!" The only way to silence that voice temporarily is to get on with the next piece of work.

*Chester Biscardi teaches music at Sarah Lawrence. His opera Tight-Rope opened Oct. 5, 1985, when a near-capacity crowd at the University of Wisconsin-Madison gave him a standing ovation. A review by James Chute in Musical America called the work "intensely moving...Words and melodic line are inseparable. Biscardi's elegant music is immediately accessible, at times even tuneful... The vocal lines are undergirded with a vivid instrumental score that illuminates the characters' inner motions."*